Caught by Jesus

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

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Imagine a crowd that gathers on a beach to hear someone speak. Perhaps the person is a motivational speaker, an activist, or a politician. The crowd grows quickly and there is no security around to protect the speaker. The speaker does what Jesus did. He goes into a boat and pulls out a bit from the shore. This gave him the perspective so the crowd could see him and it kept him safe. Today’s gospel opens with this scene.

The interesting thing about this scene is that we do not know what Jesus taught. We know the gospel writers moved around Jesus’s teachings and some of his life events to make the gospel more of a story. The gospel writers also had their own themes and highlighted specific parts of Jesus’s ministry. Because of these differences in the gospels, we see a Jesus with many parts.

Much of the gospel stories focus on Jesus’s teachings through Jesus’s words and parables. Today’s gospel does not focus on his teaching to the crowds. The teaching focuses on Jesus’s encounter with Simon Peter. If we look at this scene carefully, what Jesus does is remarkable. Jesus gets into a boat that is not his and then gives orders to the owner of the boat. Simon Peter obeys him immediately. Wouldn’t a regular encounter like this have the owner of the boat saying, “Wait you can’t just get into my boat. We’re fishing and you don’t look or smell like a fisherman. We need the space on the boat”. But none of that happened. Simon Peter must have heard about Jesus and his reputation of being a great teacher. Still Simon Peter was pretty generous letting him in the boat. Then Jesus told Simon Peter how to catch fish. Wait-- Simon Peter is the fisherman and owner of the boat, not Jesus. At this point Simon Peter responds by saying they have let the nets down all night, and they caught nothing. Simon Peter does what Jesus says, and they catch boat loads of fish. Jesus helps him catch fish and, in the process, Jesus catches Simon Peter. Simon Peter is all in.

The teaching in this story revolves around the lessons that Simon Peter learned. He learned that when you are hospitable you meet all types of people even the Lord. Hospitality can take many forms. It can be opening up your house to someone after a natural disaster. It can be offering a meal. It can be sharing space on a boat to someone who is getting crushed by a crowd. There is a Jewish tradition revolving around Elijah heralding in the messiah. It revolves around hospitality and welcoming the stranger. This is a core teaching in Judaism. Observant Jews modeled hospitality.

Simon Peter learned that sometimes we don’t have all the answers, and we need to take the advice of others. When he put down the net where Jesus told him at that time of the day, he caught fish. Jesus wasn’t a fisherman as far as we know but he did spend a lot of time around the sea. When you spend a lot of time outdoors in different environments you learn the natural rhythm of the land and animals that inhabit that environment. Simon Peter was humble. He knew that he did not know everything. There was a limit to what he knew. He was willing to take advice. He was willing to trust Jesus.

Simon Peter learned that God meets us where we are even on a fishing boat. In First Century Judaism, all the festivals and rituals revolved around life cycles in both nature and humans. They also revolved around the history of God with God’s people. They experienced God in a good harvest, the birth of a child, and in celebrating the Passover. God was intermingled in creation. People expected to encounter God in the temple, the synagogue, their occupations, their family…We in American society do not have as many rituals as our ancestors and we don’t expect to encounter God in our daily lives. We come to church and expect to encounter God, but do we expect to encounter God at the grocery store, in school, at our jobs? Simon Peter was open to encountering God on his fishing boat.

And finally, Simon Peter learned that following Jesus requires sacrifice. Sacrifice can make us uncomfortable. We hear that sacrifice means I don’t get to do what I want. It means that I must give up my dream. It means work. These thoughts are misleading. Sacrifice is how children learn to be patient, to share, and to mature. We sacrifice all the time for better health, to buy something expense, and we sacrifice for loved ones. Sacrificing brings life and wholeness to us. It helps clarify our needs and wants. It builds compassion as we give up for others. Sacrificing strengthens human bonds because we are not just thinking about us. Simon Peter gave up his fishing business, time with his family, and all the dreams he may have had for his life.

Simon Peter experienced Jesus face to face. His encounter started a relationship with him. Simon Peter was open to Jesus through hospitality, humility, trust, and sacrifice. These are the core characteristics of relationships and the characteristics of those who are “Caught by Jesus”. The Gospel of Luke gives them to us -the listeners of the gospel. We have them as an example to live as those caught by Jesus.